

David C. Lawsuit Ends...

Written by Duane Betournay, Child and Family Services

Monday, 19 January 2009 17:00 - Last Updated Monday, 23 March 2009 15:25

The final pages are placed in the massive volumes of papers, exhibits, reports, and data, too numerous to count. For 15 years, the David C. Lawsuit has dominated the day-to-day activities of the Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS). Recently, however, Federal Judge Tena Campbell dismissed the David C. Lawsuit with Prejudice.



The purpose of the lawsuit was to improve services to children in a state run, Child Welfare Program that was deemed one of the worst in the country. There was no doubt that there were problems. There were improvements needed, resources that had to be devoted, and a general recognition that children and families had to be at the center of what we do. And so began the journey. Many have asked, how did we get from those early, and very contentious beginnings, to where we are today? What were the key elements that were so critical in this child welfare reform, and what can we learn for the future? Here are but a few of the things that I found as keys.

Staff Resources: The State of Utah invested heavily in DCFS and funded hundreds of new caseworker and support positions and addressed the issue of decreasing caseloads. Now the caseloads mirror national standards and support the long held belief that time to work with children and families means safer children and better outcomes for families.

Best Practice: The way that we work with families has a lot to do with the success that we have seen. Family centered practice means that we start immediately with the family to build a team. This team works to help the family develop solutions to the issues they are facing to look at the best interest of the child/children. Coupled with a well thought out model of practice is the training component that comes with it. It also takes consistent application of policy that supports best practices. Without good policy support, practices become lost with the passage of time.

Excellent Leadership: Both on the Department and the Division levels, DCFS is fortunate to have exceptional leadership in support of the Division. This has enabled resources and policy support of best practices to remain a focus despite a change in the administration of the Department that took place in 2005 when Lisa-Michele Church was appointed. Leadership in the form of our legal team also played a significant role in our success. Susan Eisenman and Craig Barlow were incredible.

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Quality Staff: The Division of Child and Family Services is so fortunate to have one of the most highly trained, skillful workforces of any agency in state government. Their dedication to their clients and to the safety of children has made all the difference.

Quality Assurance and Monitoring: Tracking progress is key in any reform. DCFS and the Office of Services Review forged an early and successful relationship that provided monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes for Child Welfare. The monitoring process followed the best practice model that had been developed by the Division. Only through effective, and unbiased evaluation of the work being done, could we tell that we were having success. The numerous teams involved should be complimented.

Consistent Health Care: Thanks to staff from the Department of Health's "Fostering Healthy Children." Through their consistent hard work and dedication, children in Foster Care have their health care needs met and most often exceeded.

Many other factors also played a role in this accomplishment including the early work of the Monitoring Panel, the Child Protection Ombudsman, the Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group (out of Alabama), the Courts, Guardian ad Litem's Office and citizens from all over the state of Utah who came together to work with the Division. Each one of these factors were critical and will remain so as we move towards the future of Child Welfare in Utah.